

## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: Case Histories

### Author: Kate Atkinson

Born 1951, in York, England; married first husband (divorced); married second husband (a teacher; divorced); children: two daughters. Education: University of Dundee, M.A., 1974, postgraduate study in American contemporary fiction. Addresses: Home: Edinburgh, Scotland. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Doubleday UK, c/o Transworld Publishers, 61-63 Uxbridge Rd., London W5 5SA, England.

**Name:** Kate Atkinson

**Born:** 1951

**Education:** University of Dundee, M.A., 1974

**Addresses:** Agent: c/o Author Mail, Doubleday UK, c/o Transworld Publishers, 61-63 Uxbridge Rd., London W5 5SA, England



### Career:

Writer. University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland, English department tutor, c. 1980s and 1990s; also worked as a chambermaid.

### Awards:

Winner of Woman's Own short story competition, 1986; Ian St. James Award, 1993, for short story "Karmic Mothers"; Whitbread Book of the Year Award, 1995, for *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*; Yorkshire Post Book Award for best first work, 1996, for *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*; E.M. Forster Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1997; shortlisted for Whitbread Novel Award, 2004, for *Case Histories*.

### Writings:

#### Novels:

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1996.

*Human Croquet*, Picador (New York, NY), 1997.

*Emotionally Weird*, Picador (New York, NY), 2000.

*Case Histories*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2004.

*One Good Turn*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2006.

*Jolly Murder Mystery*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2006.

#### Other:

*Nice* (play), produced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at Traverse Theatre, 1996.

*Abandonment* (play; adapted from the British version by director Kit Thacker, produced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at Traverse Theater, 2000; produced in New York at Sanford Meisner Theater, 2005), Nick Hearn Books (London, England), 2000. *Not the End of the World* (stories), Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 2002.

#### Media Adaptations:

"Karmic Mothers" was adapted for BBC2 television as part of the series Tartan Shorts.



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### Sidelights:

Kate Atkinson's first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, recounts four generations of misery in a family living in Yorkshire, England, as described by Ruby Lennox, a skeptical adolescent whose story is humorously interrupted by footnotes relating incidents from the lives of her parents and grandparents. Yorkshire is a location with, according to *New York Times Book Review* critic Ben Macintyre, "an established and self-nurtured reputation as a place of heroic complaint." It is thus fitting that Atkinson's "jubilant, irreverent narrator...at once celebrates and mercilessly skewers her middle-class English family," according to Megan Harlan in *Salon*. Ruby's father, for example, is depicted as a coarse philanderer and her mother as unfeeling and grumpy. Together they own a pet shop in which they behave unlike themselves; "the parents' lives are entirely a performance, a play scripted by themselves, which might be called 'Everything is nice and normal.' But it is not," wrote Hilary Mantel in the *London Review of Books*.

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* flashes forward and backward in time, using the chapter footnotes. These leap off in odd directions apart from the primary narrative, often in pursuit of the history of household objects—missing buttons and odd pieces of china—or to recount the tale of how Ruby's great-grandmother abandoned her poverty-stricken brood, retreating with a French photographer, for example. "Atkinson cares for structure," observed Mantel, "and here is a delicate but robust skeleton on which hangs the muscle of narrative force and the tissue of loss and sadness and indecent merriment."

Atkinson garnered praise for the strength of her humor, as well as for her insights into family relationships. "*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is a multigenerational tale of a spectacularly dysfunctional Yorkshire family and one of the funniest works of fiction to come out of Britain in years," enthused Macintyre. While acknowledging the work's merits, others expressed surprise that a novel of such ordinary concerns, and a first novel at that, would be the recipient of such high honors. Tim Adams remarked in the *Observer* that "Atkinson has a genuine feel for the comedy of domestic ritual" and that *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is "an entertaining...debut."

*Emotionally Weird* tells the story of Effie and her mother Nora, who live on an isolated island off the coast of Scotland. To pass the time, the two women tell each other the secrets of their lives, although not always truthfully. Effie eventually learns the identity of her father, a secret she has never before been able to learn. The novel's narrative is interrupted by Effie's frequent recountings of the activities of her university classmates, much to the chagrin of her mother. While Greg Villepique in *Salon.com* found that the novel displays "a mischievous imagination and suggests a real talent for composing on a large canvas," he concluded that "it feels, in the end, both packed and empty, overthought and underwrought." Carolyn Kubisz in *Booklist* claimed that "Atkinson's smart, funny novel explores the power of storytelling and blurs the line between fact and fiction to the point where readers are never quite sure what is real and what is only a really good story." "Atkinson," wrote Beth E. Andersen in the *Library Journal*, "is a clever writer, suffusing her work with fresh humor, sharp word play, and the occasional touch of magic realism."

*Not the End of the World* is a collection of twelve stories that blend realism and fantastical elements. The plots range over a wide variety of subjects, from a woman who adopts a stray cat to the story of a television critic and his evil twin. In another tale, the young child of wealthy but neglectful parents is spirited away by a modern-day Mary Poppins figure. Yet another story is related through the eyes of Addison Fox, whose mother was a prostitute and who was forcefully rejected by his well-to-do father. Addison has a strange consolation when he meets his father's legitimate children and realizes that they are in even worse circumstances than he is. Atkinson does a "masterful job" portraying troubled family dynamics, according to Amy Waldman in *People*. The "wild inventiveness" of these stories makes them "exceptionally entertaining," stated Joanne Wilkinson in *Booklist*. Atkinson's short stories are "not as intense or as unified" as her novels, in the opinion of a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who nevertheless recommended *Not the End of the World* as "a sharp and wholly original collection."



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Atkinson's novel *Case Histories* serves as another showcase for her ability to portray atypical families and flawed individuals. "Disparate family histories collide and long-buried secrets resurface in this ingeniously crafted modern-day suspense narrative that combines elements of a traditional detective novel with riveting psychological character studies," reported Joni Rendon in her *BookPage* review of *Case Histories*. The principals in the story are bound together by a strange set of coincidences, linked to Jackson Brodie, a private investigator in Cambridge. Jeff Turrentine, reviewing the book for the *Washington Post*, believed that if judged on plot alone, the book would be considered a failure; however, "if you read the novel instead as a multifaceted character study grafted onto the detective-thriller format, it's a rousing triumph, thanks in whole to Atkinson's boundless sympathy for her funny, pathetic, three-dimensional and fully human creations."

## Further Readings:

### Periodicals:

*Booklist*, April 1, 1997, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 1285; April 15, 2000, Carolyn Kubisz, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 1522; November 15, 2003, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Not the End of the World*, p. 579; August, 2004, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Case Histories*, p. 1870; January 1, 2005, review of *Case Histories*, p. 768.  
*Boston Globe*, January 23, 2005, Roberta Silman, review of *Case Histories*.  
*Commonweal*, December 6, 1996, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 21; May 9, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 25.  
*Entertainment Weekly*, December 3, 2004, Jennifer Reese, review of *Case Histories*, p. 128.  
*Europe Intelligence Wire*, June 7, 2005, interview with Kate Atkinson.  
*Guardian*, October 2, 2004, Carrie O'Grady, review of *Case Histories*.  
*Harper's Bazaar*, June, 2000, Adriana Leshko, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 96.  
*Kirkus Reviews*, February 15, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 237; March 15, 2000, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 316; September 15, 2003, review of *Not the End of the World*, p. 1137; August 15, 2004, review of *Case Histories*, p. 755.  
*Kliatt*, September, 1997, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 36; September, 2005, Jodi L. Israel, review of *Case Histories*, p. 46.  
*Library Journal*, October 1, 1996, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 46; March 1, 1997, p. 100; April 1, 2000, Beth E. Andersen, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 128; September 1, 2003, Barbara Love, review of *Not the End of the World*, p. 212.  
*London Review of Books*, April 4, 1996, Hilary Mantel, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, pp. 23-24; September 15, 2004, Jenn B. Stidham, review of *Case Histories*, p. 47.  
*M2 Best Books*, December 1, 2005, "Kate Atkinson Wins Scotland's Top Literary Award."  
*New Statesman*, March 21, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 53; March 13, 2000, Amanda Craig, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 57.  
*New York Times*, June 25, 2000, Stephanie Zacharek, review of *Emotionally Weird*; December 5, 2004, Jacqueline Carey, review of *Case Histories*.  
New York Times Book Review, March 31, 1996, Ben Macintyre, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, pp. 13-14; July 6, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 7.  
*Observer*, January 28, 1996, Tim Adams, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 16; March 9, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 17.  
*People*, January 12, 2004, Amy Waldman, review of *Not the End of the World*, p. 48; December 13, 2004, Vick Boughton, review of *Case Histories*, p. 56.  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 16, 2005, Sharon Dilworth, review of *Case Histories*.  
*Publishers Weekly*, October 30, 1995, p. 46; February 10, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, pp. 63-64; April 24, 2000, review of *Emotionally Weird*, p. 57; November 10, 2003, review of *Not the End of the World*, p. 43; October 25, 2004, review of *Case Histories*, and interview with Kate Atkinson, p. 27.





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*San Francisco Chronicle*, November 21, 2004, Timothy Peters, review of *Case Histories*, p. E1.  
*Spectator*, November 18, 1995, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 49; March 8, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 31; September 4, 2004, Digby Durrant, review of *Case Histories*, p. 35.  
*Sunday Herald* (Scotland), September 12, 2004, Anita Sethi, review of *Case Histories*.  
*Times Educational Supplement*, July 19, 1996, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. R6; April 18, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 7.  
*Times Literary Supplement*, April 21, 1995, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 21; March 7, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 21.  
*Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), March 9, 1997, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 8.  
*Village Voice*, June 24, 1997, review of *Human Croquet*, p. 54.  
*Washington Post Book World*, December 19, 2004, Jeff Turrentine, review of *Case Histories*, p. 3.

**Online:**

Agony Column, [http:// trashotron.com/agony/](http://trashotron.com/agony/) (May 10, 2005), Nazalee Raja, review of *Case Histories*.  
AllReaders.com, [http:// www.allreaders.com/](http://www.allreaders.com/) (February 17, 2006), reviews of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, and *Case Histories*.  
Bookpage, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (February 17, 2006), Joni Rendon, review of *Case Histories*.  
Bookslut, <http://www.bookslut.com/> (February, 2004), Sara Pfannkuche, review of *Not the End of the World*.  
Salon.com, [http:// www.salonmagazine.com/](http://www.salonmagazine.com/) (June 29, 2000), Megan Harlan, review of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*; Greg Villepique, review of *Emotionally Weird*.  
Scotsman.com, [http:// news.scotsman.com/](http://news.scotsman.com/) (February 17, 2006), David Robinson, review of *Case Histories*.  
Seattle Times Online, [http:// seattletimes.nwsources.com/](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/) (February 17, 2006), Misha Berson, review of *Case Histories*.  
Telegraph Online, [http:// www.telegraph.co.uk/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/) (August 29, 2004), Katie Owen, review of *Case Histories*.  
Wonderful Unofficial Kate Atkinson Web site, <http://www.geocities.com/kateatkinson14/> (February 17, 2006).\*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online



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### Reviews:

*Booklist* Review: August 1, 2004

\*Starred Review\* Like Donna Tartt in *The Little Friend* (2002), 1995 Whitbread winner Atkinson (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*) here combines a compelling narrative drive with sophisticated psychological portraits and telling detail. Artfully exploiting the conventions of the detective novel while also sending them up, Atkinson gives us Jackson Brodie, the world's most empathic private eye, who seemingly channels his clients' grief while attempting to provide closure. Addicted to the plaintive songs of female country-and-western singers and heartsick over the breakup of his marriage and his separation from his daughter, Jackson becomes friend and confidant to the people who seek his aid. One of his cases involves the florid, bickering Land sisters, who, after cleaning out their father's house upon his death, are stunned to find the bedraggled blue bunny that was their sister's most prized possession before she went missing 30 years ago. Another case concerns lonely, obese Theo, who, out of concern for his daughter's safety, insisted that she work in his law office rather than as a bartender, only to find that he put her directly in harm's way. As Jackson methodically tracks down decades-old clues, Atkinson employs omniscient narration to step in and out of crime scenes both past and present. Playful humor, an impressive technique, and an offbeat detective with a penchant for weeping are the most obvious pleasures of a page-turner that succeeds in being both brainy and thoroughly entertaining. ((Reviewed August 2004)) Copyright 2004 *Booklist Reviews*.

*Library Journal* Review: September 15, 2004

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Edinburgh resident Atkinson has been touted for her clever subversion of the standard family saga (the Whitbread Prize-winning *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*), as well as her playful parody and magic realism (*Not the End of the World*). Now she turns her deft hand to the hard-boiled detective genre and wreaks a similarly wonderful havoc. Cambridge P.I. and Francophile Jackson Brodie serves as the link among three interwoven tales. Red herrings abound as Jackson plows through the sad cases of a missing toddler, a young woman brutally killed while temping at her father's law firm, and an overwrought mother driven to ax murder. The relatives of the victims, Jackson's motley clientele, prove to be alternatively pitiable and hilarious but always painfully human. Superfluous plot elements involving attempts on Brodie's life and the running commentary on Brodie's musical tastes may lead to comparisons with Ian Rankin's Inspector John Rebus series, but only briefly, for this is a very new world of old crimes. Recommended for larger fiction collections. [See Prepub Alert, *LJ* 7/04.] Jenn B. Stidham, Harris Cty. P.L., Houston Copyright 2004 *Reed Business Information*.

*BookPage* Review: November 2004

Website: <http://www.bookpage.com>

Atkinson's latest blends suspense and humor in an exploration of past crimes

Disparate family histories collide and long-buried secrets resurface in this ingeniously crafted modern-day suspense narrative that combines elements of a traditional detective novel with riveting psychological character studies. Kate Atkinson, award-winning British author of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and two other novels, artfully incorporates her gothic sensibility and keen observations on human nature into a compelling page-turner that explores the fine line between love and obsession, grief and recovery, guilt and redemption.

*Case Histories* introduces us to a convincing mix of unconventional families and imperfect individuals whose lives are pockmarked by loss, abandonment and regret. Startling connections between them emerge when three different decades-old mysteries are thrust into the lap of private detective Jackson Brodie. First, there's



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## Spotlight on: Case Histories

### Reviews: (continued)

the disappearance of three-year-old Olivia Land, whose aging sisters discover a disquieting clue among their deceased father's possessions; then the inexplicable stabbing of 18-year-old Laura Wyre by a deranged stranger during a routine workday at her father's law office; and finally, the grisly ax murder of a hapless husband ostensibly by his young wife in a fit of despair and rage. The tragedy and horror of these bygone crimes is brought sharply into focus through the use of omniscient narration, which crisscrosses family histories and vividly allows us to examine the three crime scenes in both the past and present tense.

Although decades may have intervened and the tragic headlines are now forgotten by most, the family members affected by these traumas still crave closure, leading them to Brodie's doorstep in a final attempt to lay their ghosts to rest. The emphatic private eye absorbs the burden of their collective grief while attempting to track down new leads and piece together the missing links of the long-unsolved cases. Meanwhile, he struggles with his own host of personal problems including an acrimonious divorce, a daughter growing up too quickly, and the sudden appearance of a mysterious enemy who seems to want him dead.

Increasingly, Brodie's own life takes a backseat as he becomes irreversibly entangled in the melancholic lives of his clients—the quirky and spinsterish Land sisters, the lonely and grief-obsessed father Theo Wyre, and the enigmatic sister of the convicted ax murderess, who harbors a dark secret. As he begins to unravel the threads of their seemingly incongruous cases, he uncovers subtle connections and painful truths that eventually help heal old wounds as well as bring his own troubles into sharp relief.

Featuring an engagingly offbeat private detectives and an equally intriguing cast of complex and lovably eccentric characters, *Case Histories* propels the reader forward with a rare intensity and compassion. With an unerring eye for domestic detail, Atkinson peels back the cozy trappings of family life to expose the imperfections that often lie beneath—the favoritism, selfishness and jealousy that can form dangerous fault lines. Expertly laying bare human frailties and failings, the novel exposes the indelible bonds that connect individuals and the power of emotions to alter the course of family histories.

Atkinson has conjured a wonderfully inventive take on the classic detective novel that jolts readers out of complacency by combining ordinary settings with macabre twists. The result is a highly original and entertaining novel that is the author's best to date, successfully blending elements of comedy and tragedy with rich insights into the human heart.

Joni Rendon writes from Hoboken, New Jersey. Copyright 2004 *BookPage Reviews*.

*Kirkus* Review: August 15, 2004

After two self-indulgent detours, Atkinson proves that her Whitbread Award-winning debut, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996), was no fluke with a novel about three interconnected mysteries. They seem totally unrelated at first to private detective Jackson Brodie, hired by separate individuals in Cambridge, England, to investigate long-dormant cases. Three-year-old Olivia Land disappeared from a tent in her family's backyard in 1970; 34 years later, her sisters Amelia and Julia discover Olivia's stuffed toy in their recently deceased father's study and want Jackson to find out what he had to do with the disappearance. Theo Wyre's beloved 18-year-old daughter Laura was murdered by a knife-wielding lunatic in 1994, and he too hires Jackson to crack this unsolved murder. Michelle was also 18 when she went to jail in 1979 for killing her husband with an ax while their infant daughter wailed in the playpen; she vanished after serving her time, but Shirley Morrison asks Jackson to find, not her sister Michelle, but the niece she promised to raise, then was forced to hand over to grandparents. The



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## Spotlight on: Case Histories

### Reviews: (continued)

detective, whose bitter ex-wife uses Jackson's profound love for their eight-year-old daughter to torture him, finds all these stories of dead and/or missing girls extremely unsettling; we learn toward the end why the subject of young women in peril is particularly painful for him. Atkinson has always been a gripping storyteller, and her complicated narrative crackles with the earthy humor, vibrant characterizations, and shrewd social observations that enlivened her first novel but were largely swamped by postmodern game-playing in *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000). Here, she crafts a compulsive page-turner that looks deep into the heart of sadness, cruelty, and loss, yet ultimately grants her charming p.i. (and most of the other appealingly offbeat characters, including one killer) a chance at happiness and some measure of reconciliation with the past. Wonderful fun and very moving: it's a pleasure to see this talented writer back on form. Agent: Peter Straus/Rogers, Coleridge & White

*Publishers Weekly* Reviews: October 2004

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

In this ambitious fourth novel from Whitbread winner Atkinson (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*), private detective Jackson Brodie-ex-cop, ex-husband and weekend dad-takes on three cases involving past crimes that occurred in and around London. The first case introduces two middle-aged sisters who, after the death of their vile, distant father, look again into the disappearance of their beloved sister Olivia, last seen at three years old, while they were camping under the stars during an oppressive heat wave. A retired lawyer who lives only on the fumes of possible justice next enlists Jackson's aid in solving the brutal killing of his grown daughter 10 years earlier. In the third dog-eared case file, the sibling of an infamous ax-bludgeoner seeks a reunion with her niece, who as a baby was a witness to murder. Jackson's reluctant persistence heats up these cold cases and by happenstance leads him to reassess his own painful history. The humility of the extraordinary, unabashed characters is skillfully revealed with humor and surprise. Atkinson contrasts the inevitable results of family dysfunction with random fate, gracefully weaving the three stories into a denouement that taps into collective wishful thinking and suggests that warmth and safety may be found in the aftermath of blood and abandonment. Atkinson's meaty, satisfying prose will attract many eager readers. Copyright 2004 *Reed Business Information*.



## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Case Histories*

### Discussion Questions:

1. The three cases that open *Case Histories* are at first quite separate, and leave you wondering how Atkinson is going to pull it all together into one story. You might discuss whether she is successful at doing that—and how.
2. *Case Histories* has three unsolved crimes and has a private eye as hero. Kate Atkinson is known as a 'literary writer' and won the Whitbread Prize for her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. How is *Case Histories* different from a traditional detective novel—or is it?
3. Jackson believes 'that his job was to help people be good rather than punish them for being bad.' Another discussion point would be whether you think he is a moral character, and how you feel the revelation of the tragedy in his own past illuminates his actions in the novel.
4. To Jackson, it seems as if everyone he encounters has lost someone or something. One of Kate Atkinson's recurrent themes is that of lost children. In spite of her wicked sense of humour, she creates an overwhelming sense of tension in this novel. Is it that this theme speaks directly to the lost child deep inside every one of us?
5. 'Novels gave you a completely false idea about life, they told lies and the implied there were endings when in reality there were no endings, everything just went on and on and on.' Is Kate Atkinson being mischievous here, or is this statement true of this novel?

<http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk>





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Spotlight on:  
**Case Histories**